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Urban Monasticism and Monasteries of Early Byzantine Palestine – Preliminary Observations

Our knowledge of Palestinian monasticism in the early Byzantine period (4th-7th centuries A.D) is fairly substantial[1]. In addition to texts, we also possess quite extensive archaeological data on monastic complexes, based to a great extent on the large number of archaeological surveys and excavations carried out in the region, especially in the last three decades[2]. While various aspects pertinent to monasticism in the different geographical regions of Byzantine Palestine have been occasionally addressed[3], the monasticism of Judean desert has received by far the most scholarly attention. The very idea of monasticism being set in the desert, its exotic nature, and the relative abundance and scope of primary literary sources dedicated to Judean desert monasticism, coupled with the availability and ease of examining the physical remains of many monastic complexes in that region, naturally made it an appealing target for scholarly research[4]. In a recent book dedicated, at least according to its title, to monasteries of Palestinian in the early Byzantine period, the main body of text describes the Judean desert monasticism[5].

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[1] For a summary of early Byzantine monasticism in Palestine see L. Perrone, "Monasticism in the Holy Land: From the Beginnings to the Crusaders", *Porch-Orient Chrétien* 45 (1995), pp. 31-52.

[2] Tzaferis, V, "Early Monks and Monasteries in the Holy Land", *Δελτίον τῆς Χριστιακῆς Ἀρχαιολογικῆς Ἑταιρείας,* Περίοδος Δ', Τόμος ΙΕ, Athens, 1989-1990), pp. 43-66. The main drawback of this account is that its author, too often, generalize on various aspects without having any supporting evidence.

[3] E.g., B. Bitton-Ashkelony and A. Kofsky, "Gazan Monasticism in the Fourth-Sixth Centuries: From Anchoritic to Cenobitic", *Porch-Orient Chrétien* 50 (2000), pp. 14-62; or U. Dahari, *Monastic Settlements in South Sinai in the Byzantine Period: The Archaeological Remains,* (Israel Antiquities Reports no. 9, Jerusalem, 2000)

[4] The most influential account on Judean desert monasticism that inspired a generation of Israeli archaeologists to conduct an extensive series of archeological surveys of this region was written by Derwas. J. Chitty, *The Desert A City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Chriptian Empire* (London-Oxford, 1966). The harvest of many of these surveys can be seen in the following publications: Y. Hirschfeld, *The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period,* (New Haven and London, 1992, and J. Patrich, Sabas*, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism: A Comparative Study in Eastern Monasticism, Fourth to Seventh Centuries*, (Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 32, Washington, D.C. 1995), and in the extensive bibliographies therein.

[5] J. Binns*, Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ, The Monasteries of Palestine 314-631*, (Oxford, 1996, Paperback ed.)

In spite of the extensive scholarly activity, a very significant facet of early Byzantine monasticism in Palestine, urban monasticism and urban monastic complexes, was not only overlooked but also, to a large extent, underestimated.

It is therefore my intention, to call for closer scrutiny of this important topic and exemplify the research potential of such a subject.

To the best of my knowledge, there is not even one single chapter or a paper, let alone a book, which is exclusively dedicated to a thematic study of urban monasticism and monasteries of Byzantine Palestine. Admittedly, here and there one can find references to urban monasticism or to monasteries in Byzantine Palestine, foremost, with regards to Jerusalem and the Negev region. Nevertheless, the topic and main themes of these studies have not been dedicated to urban monasticism or monasteries but rather to wider subjects.

In a book on urbanism and other forms of settlements in the Negev Desert during the Byzantine Period, for example, R. Rubin dedicated less than two pages to describe monasticism in the Negev region. In his concluding sentence of this paragraph he asserted that monasticism in the Negev was to a large extent an urban phenomenon[6]. Several years later P. Figueras, aware of the lack of publication on monasteries of Byzantine Palestine in regions other than Judean desert, produced a list and plans of monasteries in the Negev Desert region according to the available literary sources, and several archaeological criteria[7]. However, the gazetteer is primarily an inventory of sites that clearly needs further research. Figueras, for example, did not differentiate between monasteries in the towns, or large villages of the Negev, and those existing in small or isolated sites.

Another case in point of the state of research on urban monasteries in Byzantine Palestine is from Jerusalem. In a recent book comprised of a collection of essays on the history of Jerusalem during the Roman and Byzantine periods, there were several chapters that touch upon monasticism and monasteries in Jerusalem[8]. Yet, none of them address monasticism in Jerusalem as a distinct topic.

The deficient state of modern research on urban monasticism in Byzantine Palestine, and it seems also to be the case for other regions of the early Byzantine world, stems from three principal reasons. The first and most obvious reason is that monasticism was, and still is, first and foremost associated with

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[6] R. Rubin, *The Negev as a Settled Land, Urbanism and Settlement in the Desert in the Byzantine Period,* (Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 49-50 (Hebrew)

[7] P. Figueras, "Monks and Monasteries in the Negev Desert," *Liber Annus* 45 (1995), 399-448

[8] L. Di Segni and Y. Tsafrir, "Ethnic Composition of the Population of Jerusalem in the Byzantine Period", in Y. Tsafrir and S. Safrai (eds.), *The History of Jerusalem, The Roman and Byzantine Periods (70-638 CE)*, (Jerusalem, 1999), pp. 261-289 (Hebrew).

withdrawal from society—*ἀναχωρησις*, that is, retreat from humanity, from the cities and towns of late antiquity where most men women and children resided, into the desert. To put this in the words of a contemporary figure like St. Jerome " If you wish to perform the office of priest, live in cities and townships, and make salvation of others the gain of your soul. But if you desire to be what is called a monk, that is a solitary, what are you doing in cities, which are after all the dwelling places not of solitaries but of the many?"[9].

The second reason, which to a large extent stems from the first one, is that the lion's share of the relevant primary sources, predominantly, describe the lives and abodes of the monks who live in the desert.

The third reason, for largely disregarding urban monasticism, is the relatively meager archaeological data that has been associated with urban monastic remains. In this regard, if we are to make sense of, and justify the study of urban monasticism as a separate topic, we urgently need to set criteria by which one can, intelligibly, characterize urban monasticism, and monastic complexes.

As an archaeologist concen, first of all, with the mundane facets of monasticism, I suggest several guidelines according to which one can begin to delineate urban monasticism and monasteries. The first guideline defining an urban monastery would be its location in relation to the city or village. While, at face value, there seems to be no problem labeling a ruin of a monastery, unearthed within the dense infrastructure of a city, as an urban monastery, it become*s* more difficult to define it as such when the ruin is found some distance from the city. However, the question as to whether that monastery should be defined as an urban monastery becomes more relevant if the monks or nuns of that monastery were associated with, or depended heavily on the city. An exemplary case would be the 'Kathisma monastery, located at some distance to the south of Jerusalem, on the road to Bethlehem. The monks dwelling there were known as Spoudaioi, the friends of the suffering or zealots, who served at the church of the Holy Sepulcher[10].

A second guideline would be to divide the functions of urban monasteries into sub-categories. One has bear in mind questions such as: what was the monastery designated for, or what role did it play in the life of the city or village? Was a monastery built for, and inhabited by men or women of a specific the city, or did a specific ethnic *group* institute it? Was it built to facilitated seclusion space- a 'desert' within the crowded space of the city, or did it serve

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[9] Cited and trans. by C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism,* (London and New York, 1984), p.1

[10] Y. Ashkenazi, *The Patriarchate of Jerusalem: Its Organization and its Place in the Christian Society of Byzantine Palestine,* Ph.D. diss., (Haifa, Oct.1999, in Hebrew), p. 156. On the role of Spoudaioi see S. Pétridés, " Le monastére des Spoudaei a Jérusalem", Échos d'Orient 4 (1900-1901), pp.225-231; idem, "Spoudaei et Philopones", Échos d'Orient 7 (1904), pp. 341-348

to host pilgrims, passers-by or treat the ill and the needy? Being aware of such questions would clearly help to comprehend the shape and infrastructure of an unknown monastery.

Classifying urban monastic complexes according to their size, dimension, and spatial plan might be also beneficial in defining urban monasteries. While a monastery in a remote place or in the desert had to have certain facilities to sustain itself, and thus must have included certain architectural features, which by necessity imply a minimal size, a monastery in inhabited areas such as cities or villages, could have been very small and include not more than a cell or two. This was probably the case with the initial stage of the monastery established in Jerusalem by Peter the Iberian and his companion, John[11]. However, if a monastery was established or used to host pilgrims then it would have most likely comprised of a large and complicated infrastructure.

Given the initial stage of my research, and the limited space allotted for this paper, I would like to illustrate, the potentiality of focused research on urban monasticism in Byzantine Palestine. To do this I chose to look, selectively, at monastic settings in Jerusalem, and then at a number of monastic complexes in the Negev.

Before I begin this task, it would be useful to explain the choice of the two settings. While the Negev desert region comprises numerous large and small sites, Jerusalem is a unique example of a region whereby the geographical definition of 'region' is different than in all other ones. The relatively high number of monasteries in this confined geographical area justifies the reference to this city as a distinctive region. The choice to present these two regions was also made in order to exemplify the unbalanced representation of the two sources we possess (literary and archaeological sources) for studying monasticism in Byzantine Palestine. While the picture of monasticism in Jerusalem is based, to a large extent, on literary sources, that of the Negev region is first and foremost based on archaeological data.

In contrast to Jerusalem, the mother of all churches, the principal Christian site of the Holy Land, and one of the largest cities in Byzantine Palestine, the large sites of Negev were not more than small towns, or more appropriately, large villages[12]. However, from the point of view, which regards the uninhabited desert as the ideal place to practice monastic life, any small town or a large village inhabited by hundreds of men, women, and children is as unsuitable for practicing monastic life as a city. In this light, Jerusalem and the large village of Nessana in the Negev, or for this matter, any village in any other region, should be treated similarly, at least, at this stage of the research.

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[11] *Vita Petri*, p. 45 (ed. R. Rabbe)

[12] Nessana, the second largest site in the Negev, after the only polis in the region, Halutza (Elusa), is referred to in the papyri discovered in its northern church complex as a village

Jerusalem

More than a century ago, the Augustine father, S. Vailhé, published the hitherto most exclusive alphabetic list of Byzantine monasteries founded in Palestine up to the 10th century AD[13]. The list, primarily based on literary sources and several inscriptions known at the time, comprises one hundred and thirty seven monasteries. Since some of these monasteries had been referred to in ancient sources by different names, the real number of monasteries must be smaller (about 125). Vailhé did not include in his list monasteries that had been mentioned in sources he did not have access to, such as Armenian or Georgian. According to this list, more than 25 monasteries were located in Jerusalem or in close vicinity to the city[14]. Most of these monasteries were adjacent or in close vicinity to the three most venerable sites for Christians in Jerusalem -The Holy Sepulcher, Mount of Olives, and Mt. Sion. An Armenian source dated to the 7th century enumerates ca. 70 monasteries in Jerusalem. This might be an exaggerated number but it certainly reflects a reality of a rich monastic movement and institutions[15]. Several more archaeological sites, which were recently unearthed and identified by their excavators as monastic complexes, can now be added to this list[16]. These discoveries invite reexamination and reassessment of several archaeological sites that had been excavated in the past, and which were not regarded as possibly-components of urban monastic complexes.

According to Vailhé's list, the number of the monasteries built on Mt. of Olives was by far the largest one (at least 8). Among these latter monasteries one should recall the female monastery (nunnery) built by Melania the Elder in 375, and a monastery and nunnery built by her granddaughter Melania the Younger in the third decade of the fifth century[17].

It is worth noting that the number of female monasteries in Jerusalem was relatively high. The same can be also said about the number of monasteries either for man or women that were founded by women, all of noble or royal families. Although we have very little information about nunneries in Palestine

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[13] S. Vailhé, "Répertoire alphabétique des monastères de Palestine", *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* 4 (1899), pp. 512-542, and (1900), pp. 19-48, 272-292.

[14] Vailhé, "Répertoire alphabétique des monastères", nos. 1, 5-6, 8, 15, 27, 33, 36, 41, 44, 49, 51, 57, 67, 73-74, 78-80, 90, 96, 100, 105, 108, 118, 134. For a recent account on churches and monasteries built in Jerusalem in the Byzantine period see Y. Ashkenazi, *The Patriarchate of Jerusalem,* esp. pp. 81-86, 139-159.

[15] A. K. Sanjian, "Anastas Vardapet's List of Armenian Monasteries in Seventh-Century Jerusalem: A Critical Examination", *Le Muséon*, 82/3-4 (1969), pp. 265-292

[16] E.g. the monastic complexes recently unearthed to the north of Damascus Gate. See V. Tzaferis *et al*., "Excavations at the Third Wall, North of the Jerusalem Old City" in H. Geva (ed.), *Ancient Jerusalem Revealed,* (Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 287-292, and D. Amit and S. R. Wolff, " An Armenian Monastery in the Morasha Neighborhood, Jerusalem", ibid. pp. 293-298.

[17] Vailhé, "Répertoire alphabétique des monastères", no. 78 and 79

it would be safe to propose that such institutions were more often than not founded in urban settings. Plausibly, one of the main reasons to be account for the relative high number of female monasteries in an urban setting, as well as the relatively high number of monasteries established by women in the cities, had to do with the rather more comfortable and secure environment for women, in these places. This issue certainly deserves further discussion and research.

The remains of- what seem~~s~~ to be~~,~~ two monastic complexes in Jerusalem and in its close vicinity should be presented here in order to illustrate the intriguing theme of urban monasteries in Byzantine Palestine. The first one is the monastery dedicated to Mary on Mt. Olives, which according to Procopius of Caesarea was renovated by the emperor Justinian in the mid sixth century[18]. Like almost all the monasteries in Jerusalem mentioned in the written sources we know nothing about the exact location of this monastery. However, an excavation that was conducted near the crest of Mt. Olives about a hundred years ago revealed remains of a large structure that consisted of a number of rooms, water cisterns and the eastern part of a basilical church abutted on its northeast side by a two room chapel. An inscription in the mosaic floor of this chapel recalls three men that were all *monazontes*, i.e., monks[19]. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that the remains are those of a monastery. The floor of the apse and the sanctuary area were made of an outstanding *opus sectile*. Since there are, to the best of my knowledge, only few *opus sectile* floors from this period in Palestine, and because such high quality of craftsmanship can be reasonably attributed to a workshop in a major artistic center, e.g. Constantinople, there is room to hypothesize that the remnants unearthed on Mt. Olives are those of the renovated monastery dedicated to Mary. Whether this hypothesis is right or wrong, the monastery that was partially unearthed on Mt. Olives, illustrates the difficulty of correlating between text and artifact, and yet demonstrates the potential in reexamination of long forgotten literary sources and archaeological records.

The second complex, uncovered at the foot of the south wall of the Temple Mount, and recently identified as a monastery for women[20], also exemplifies the perplexity of correlating between text and artifact. It also demonstrates a major archaeological dilemma of how to identify the remains of a site in urban environs, as these of a monastery. A common type of multi-storied Roman and Byzantine courthouse was among several structures, which excavated to

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[18] Procopius of Caesarea, *Buildings,* V.ix.8, H. B. Dewing (ed. and trans.), LCL no. 341, (Cambridge, Mass., 1940), pp. 358-359

[19] C. Schick, "Recent Discoveries on the Mount of Olives", Palestine Exploration Journal Quarterly Statement, (1895), pp. 32-36; F. J. Bliss and A. C. Dickie, *Excavations in Jerusalem 1894-1897*, (London, 1898), pp. 211-224

[20] E. Mazar, *The Monastery of the Virgins : Byzantine Period, Temple Mount excavations in Jerusalem,* (Jerusalem, 1999).

the south of the Temple Mount. Its excavators did not identify the ruins they unearthed as a monastery but rather as a residential quarter[21]. However, as I have just noted, this same complex was identified as a nunnery and was given the name "The monastery of the Virgins", by E. Mazar who is in charge of publishing the complete results of the Temple Mount excavations. Mazar -has suggested identifying the multi-storied courthouse with a monastery of virgins mentioned in an early sixth century account, "On the Topography of the Holy Land," allegedly written by a certain Theodosius, an archdeacon. In his account he describes a monastery bearing this name. According to him, a monastery of virgins (*castas*) was located below the Pinnacle of the Temple[22]. Admittedly, the description fits the structure mentioned above. Nevertheless, for a number of substantial archaeological considerations, the most of which is the lack of any identifiable prayer hall, a number of archaeologists do not agree with this identification nor do they agree that it was at all a monastery[23]. If we leave this disagreement for a moment, and accept the excavator's opinion, we are faced with the intriguing question of identifying monasteries in urban settings.

To explain my point I would like to draw the reader's attention, again, to the remains of the monastery with the basilical church on Mt. Olives which I have hypothesized to be the monastery dedicated to Mary; to the remnants of the so called "Monastery of the Virgins" at the foot of the Temple Mount; and to the recently discovered Armenian monastery, located to the north of Damascus Gate[24], not far from the famous basilica of St. Stephen that was the conventual church of the largest monastic complex in Jerusalem since the middle of the fifth century. While the "Monastery of St. Mary", on Mt. Olives, had an extremely elaborated and spacious basilical church, the Armenian monastery had a single space chapel as its prayer hall, and no prayer hall was clearly identified at the Monastery of the Virgins, at the foot of the Temple Mount. While the function of the monastery on Mt. Olives is not clear (the existence of a spacious basilica testify that it was very likely used by a large crowd), the Armenian monastery was most likely used to host pilgrims, and the monastery at the foot of the Temple Mount was probably, if it is to be identified with the monastery mentioned by Theodosius, a nunnery. The plans and inner arrangements, although fragmentary, of each of these complexes are different, yet it correlates with the diverse functions of the monasteries.

Moving on to Negev, we will notice that similar issues emerge also in other regions of Byzantine Palestine.

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[21] B. Mazar, "The Archaeological Excavations near the Temple Mount", in *Jerusalem Revealed*, (New Haven and London 1976), pp.36-38; M. Ben-Dov, In *The Shadow Of The Temple, The Discovery of Ancient Jerusalem*, (New York, 1982), pp. 243-259

[22] Cited by E. Mazar, *The Monastery of the Virgins*, p. 15

[23] Oral communication with a number of Byzantine archaeologists in Israel.

[24] D. Amit and S. R. Wolff, "An Armenian Monastery", pp. 293-298

The Negev

There was in each of the large settlements of the Roman-Byzantine central Negev, at least, one basilical church that was identified as belonging to a monastery. These are the northern church at Rehovot-in-the-Negev (Khirbet Ruheibe); the northern church at the acropolis of Oboda (‘Avdat / Eboda); the northern church at Nessana (‘Auja el-Hafir); and the northern church at Shivta (Sobota/ Isbeita)[25]. The monastic nature of these churches was, primarily, proposed because of the presence of rooms, or cells, in their respective atria. In other words, it was assumed that the partition walls dividing of the space of these atria into smaller units indicated the dwelling of monks in them. Also, several burial inscriptions that mentioned few monastic titles, found in some of these churches, were taken into account in suggesting the monastic nature of the churches. I have suggested –elsewhere- that the existence of tombs in these specific churches, as well as in other churches of Byzantine Palestine, might be used also as a preliminary indicator for identifying monastic complexes[26].

Identifying the above mentioned Negev churches with monastic establishments raises several important issues, which has bearings on other similar complexes in other regions. One such issue is the disproportion of the monastic component in the ecclesiastic precinct. While the churches of the Negev were spacious three-aisled basilicas, the number of cells, in their atria (and their dimensions) clearly indicate that the number of monks inhabiting these spaces were rather small. How can we account for this disproportion?

I suggested that these basilical churches were not primarily built for the monks but, rather, were built and used by a wider community of people from the settlements near which these monasteries were constructed. There seems to have been no reason to build such spacious churches just for a small community of monks. I assume that the monks provided religious services for their respective communities. In return these monks were endowed with a decent standard of living to make do with their monastic life[27]. Similar arrangements have undoubtedly existed in other regions of Palestine and beyond.

The last but not least important issue of urban monasticism is the nature of its inhabitants as is, specifically, reflected in the northern church of Nessana and in the papyri found in one of its rooms. While the

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[25] To keep the number of footnotes reasonably low I refer the reader to H. Goldfus, *Tombs and Burials in Churches and monasteries of Byzantine Palestine (324-628 A.D.)*, Ph. D. diss., (Princeton, Jan. 1997), pp. 56-58, 70-71, 80-82, 89-90 where one will find a brief description of each of these churches. No monastic complex was so far found at Halutza, the only polis in the Negev region. However, a monastery of the *laura* type is attested in the literary source, see P. Figueras, “*Monks and Monasteries*”, pp. 410-411

[26] Goldfus, *Tombs and Burials*, esp. pp. 241-243

[27] Goldfus, *Tombs and Burials*, pp. 241-242

monks of the Judean desert and many other isolated areas in Palestine and beyond were more or less homogeneous in many respects, and above all united in their desire for celibacy and seclusion from the world of men, women, and families, it was not always the case with monks and nuns of the cities and towns. The burial inscriptions, and various documents (papyri) of several men and women, members of one or two families living in Nessana, which were unearthed in the northern church of this settlement clearly indicate a completely different nature of monasticism from that of the Judean desert monastic communities[28]. The inscriptions in the church indicate that three generations of a one particular family were priests, monks and *hegumenoi*, and a nun. This means that the idea of celibacy was different, or less relevant, for these people than e.g. for the monks of the Judean desert. The papyri associated with this, and maybe another family, reveal a world of monasticism that possessed worldly goods, was well involved, influential, and intermingled with the other members of town. Needless to say, the monastic panorama revealed to us in Nessana could most likely be expected to be seen in other cities and towns of Byzantine Palestine.

To sum up, urban monasticism was a much wider phenomenon than it is thought to be, or at least, as it is reflected in modern scholarship, as well as in the extant ancient sources, and in the naturally biased archaeological record. It was a rich and diverse, and much less homogenous than the monasticism of Judean desert and other isolated types of monasticism. To my mind, urban and rural monasticism was a very wide and prevalent phenomenon. I would even dare to say that in terms of number of monastic institutions of various kinds, there were many more and widespread urban ones than that of the "isolated" types of monasteries.

[28] For a discussion of these inscriptions and papyri see Rubin, *The Negev*, pp. 51-53, and Goldfus, *Tombs and Burials*, esp. pp. 88-89